DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 355 CS 510 966

AUTHOR Bordelon, Suzanne
TITLE Service Learning and Multiculturalism: Integrating Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders into the Writing Classroom.
PUB DATE 2002-03-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Alaska Natives; Cultural Awareness; Higher Education; Multicultural Education; *Service Learning; *Student Reaction; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Contact Zones; *Native Americans; University of Alaska Fairbanks

ABSTRACT

Service-learning experiences can introduce students to locations they typically might not encounter in the composition classroom. This paper discusses a unique program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks that provides a rich and productive contact zone for students. Specifically, the paper discusses the author/educator's attempts to connect her writing students with a program that brings Native Elders to the campus where they serve as Elders-in-Residence. The paper shares positive stories about the students' reactions, but there were also challenges encountered in integrating service-learning and multicultural components in the classroom. In addition, the paper explores ways of potentially responding to the challenges. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 464 355

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S Bordelon

2A

Service Learning and Multiculturalism:

Integrating Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders into the Writing Classroom

Suzanne Bordelon
University of Alaska Fairbanks
"Connecting the Text and the Street" CCCC 2002

Often those integrating service into the composition classroom have applied Mary Louise Pratt's metaphor of the contact zone "to tout the value of the service learning and its intersections between classrooms and communities" (Ball and Goodburn 81). Pratt defines contact zones as spaces where "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination" (qtd. in Ball and Goodburn 81). As Kevin Ball and Amy M. Goodburn point out, the classroom itself has provided students with opportunities "to explore and negotiate difference" (81). However, service-learning experiences can introduce students to locations they typically might not encounter in the composition classroom.

In this paper, I will discuss my efforts to take advantage of a unique program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks that provides a rich and productive contact zone for students. Specifically, I will discuss my attempts to connect my writing students with a program that brings Native Elders to our campus. Similar to others who have integrated service into the composition class, I have some positive stories to share with you. However, I also will talk about some of the challenges I encountered in integrating service-learning and multicultural components into my classroom. In addition, I will explore ways of potentially responding to the challenges.

Before discussing my service-learning efforts, it might be helpful if I told you more about the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). Currently, more than 9,000 students

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 510 966

atte d UAF, either at its main campus in Fairbanks, at a branch campus, or by distance delivery ("History"). According to the UAF Office of Planning and Analysis, in fall 2000 the university had about 5,000 full- and part-time students at the main Fairbanks campus and about 10 percent of those students were Native Alaskans ("Ethnicity and Campus" and "Headcount by Campus"). On a statewide level, Native Alaskans and American Indians made up 15.6 percent of the population based on 2000 U.S. Census statistics. At this time, the university has no formal service-learning center coordinating community contacts and programs. Individual teachers who want to integrate a service component into their classes must design and implement their own programs.

My discussion is based on my experience this fall teaching an Honors intermediate-level core writing course. I integrated service into the course because I'm keenly interested in service learning, and our Honors Program is exploring adding a service-learning component to its program. As a complement to service, I included a multicultural component in my class, which connected some of my writing students to an unusual course offered by our university. This course is Alaska Native Studies 401, Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders, which was created in the fall of 1982 and is offered each term. In this course, Native elders are invited to campus from throughout the state and serve as Elders-in-Residence. The course is designed to allow students to meet and interact with the elders who tell students "their experiences, recollect histories, and express cultural values" (Alaska Native Studies Department). Each session of Alaskan Native elders talking to students is taped and is part of a larger oral history project (Alaska Native Studies Department).

Since this was my first attempt to integrate these elements into my classroom, I decided that I would make the service-learning and multicultural components optional rather than required. So for the final project, students could select from three options:

the first was a Community-Service Research Project, the second was the Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders Project, and the third was a Traditional Research Project. One out of eleven students selected the Community-Service Research Project; three selected the Native Elders Project; six selected the Traditional Research Project; and one decided to do a multigenre research project. (This student had completed a multigenre paper in high school and wanted to try it at the college level.)

The course emphasized research, argument, and an exploration of the social forces that shape the lives of individuals and the broader culture. The text for the course was Ann Watters and Marjorie Ford's *Writing for Change: A Community Reader*, which I supplemented with essays reflecting an Alaskan perspective. For their final projects, students wrote reflective logs, prepared an analytical research paper, and completed oral presentations. Those students completing the service-learning and multicultural components, either option one or two, were to use their experience to form the basis of their research projects, which would explore some sort of community or social problem or an issue or problem facing Alaska Native cultures. Thus, my course would fall under what Thomas Deans characterizes as writing *about* the community.[1] In other words, students were encouraged to engage in community service and then draw on that experience in their own writing.

For the service-learning component, students selected a community agency and then spent four to five hours with that agency during the term. As I mentioned, only one student chose this option. Gabe volunteered at Immaculate Conception Soup Kitchen in downtown Fairbanks. He selected this agency because he had previously volunteered at the soup kitchen. For his project, he explored homelessness in Fairbanks. Those of you unfamiliar with Fairbanks may not know that winter temperatures can plummet to 60 degrees below zero. Living in Fairbanks requires a certain vigilance and awareness in

terms of how to deal with the harshness of winter. As Gabe points out in his paper, cars are plugged in during the winter months, houses are specially designed to maintain heat, and humans are virtually unrecognizable in their layers and layers of winter clothing. But for those who have no car, no home, or no clothing, the question of homelessness becomes one of mere survival. In his paper, Gabe explored those issues specific to Fairbanks and the need for increased funding and community awareness.

In reading Gabe's reflections on his project, I saw connections to research by others attempting to integrate service and writing. Anecdotal evidence from faculty and students frequently suggests that increased motivation and a deeper sense of connection are among the outcomes of such efforts (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, Watters 2-3). I also saw those outcomes in Gabe's reflective essay on his project:

> The community service component of the class was the most important part of my research project. Although not required in this class, I believe it would make a very good standard part of future Honors English classes. I enjoyed the time I spent at the soup kitchen, and I think that I learned or experienced more than what was simply required for the completion of the assignment. The most challenging aspect of this assignment was probably just talking to people. I am naturally introverted and not very social, and I was worried that homeless people might not want to talk about their lifestyle with a nosy college student like me. Fortunately I was able to overcome this and found most of the people I talked with to be very cooperative and helpful.

In reading his paper and reflective essay, I could tell that Gabe's learning experience extended well beyond the black-and-white limits of my assignment sheet. He volunteered several times at the shelter, interviewed homeless people and shelter workers, and reviewed research on homelessness in Fairbanks. He became fully engaged in his project. Gabe also gave me an idea that I plan to use in future classes. A computer-science major, Gabe borrowed one of the library's digital camera to take pictures of his fellow students when they were presenting their final projects, and he also took a group picture of the entire class. He then sent the pictures to everyone over our

class e-mail list. The pictures helped to make the final projects and the class as a whole a memorable experience.

Three students decided to complete the Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders Project. Prior to the start of fall term, I met with Dr. George Charles, who taught the Native Elders course, and he agreed to allow two or three of my students to attend his course when the elders were speaking to the class. One student, who audited my class, was a graduate student from Japan. Although she did not complete a formal project, she attended class sessions with elders, went to a potlatch, and watched previous tapes of other elders. The second student who completed this project was a freshman. She had come to the university from San Rafael, California, and was interested in learning more about Alaskan life in general and Native Alaskans in particular. The third student was a sophomore from Noorvik, a small village of about 650 people, located in Alaska's arctic region about forty-five miles northeast of Kotzebue in northwest Alaska. A majority of the people in Noorvik are Inupiaq Eskimos. Many of the Alaska Natives in Eva's village still rely on hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild foods to survive.

In her research project, Eva explored how economic changes during the past one-hundred years had affected the subsistence lifestyle of her community. To complete research for her project, she attended sessions of the Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders course. Here are her reflections on this course:

> Although I am here at Fairbanks and not in Noorvik, where I grew up, I am happy here because I know that I was taught the ways of my culture and will never forget the meanings that [were] taught to me as a child. The Native Elders class here at the University, not only accustomed me to other cultures, but [it also allowed me] to gain knowledge from the elders who take their time out from their own villages and share their life stories. It was like being back at home listening to an elder that I wanted to know more about and also [eating] the different native goods that [they] had at the potlatches.

From Eva's comments, we can see that the project helped to validate her home literacy experiences and practices. The most significant part of her project, though, was not the project itself, but Eva's personal discoveries along the way:

> The most interesting aspect of completing my research project was that while [in] the process of completing the project, I found tapes of my grandmother and that to me is more important than anything else this semester. I learned so much just from hearing her stories of where and how she grew up and her life.

In gathering research for her project, Eva discovered audiotapes that had been made of her grandmother, who is now deceased. Eva made copies of the tapes and brought them home to her family for Christmas. Similar to Gabe, Eva's learning experience extended well beyond the limits of the course assignment.

The other student, Celeste from California, had difficulty choosing her research question and did not find the Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders course helpful to her research process. The class also conflicted with other classes she was taking, so it was difficult for her to attend sessions. In her paper, "The Tragedy of Native Alaskan Dental Care," Celeste explored dental care issues in rural Alaska. Celeste said she had difficulty finding points of intersection between her paper and the Native Elders class. Her difficulties may be related to the fact that much of the research for Celeste's paper was drawn from books and reports rather than personal interviews, as was Eva's. Despite the difficulties, Celeste selected this project as her strongest in her portfolio:

> My best work in this class is my Native Research Project. I chose this project as my personal best because not only was it the most difficult to write and therefore a great accomplishment to complete, but it was also original, persuasive, and in-depth. This work stands out from the others completed in the course of this term because it required extensive reflection, patience, and research. I had to take my time to develop many avenues of thought. In that process, I found that I had become genuinely interested in the government's actions regarding Native Alaskan dental care even though I never would have imagined a place for my personality and thought in an essay that far removed from everything I typically identify myself with. This paper is stronger than my others this term because this one took me to a new place within myself and let me grow in perspective, if nothing else.

We can see from Celeste's comments that completing the project did introduce her to a contact zone that she might not normally have experienced. Although Celeste did not seem to benefit from the Native elders course, she worked with and talked about her paper with Eva, who gave her insight into Native dental care issues in her own village.

As I mentioned, the majority of the students in the course (six of the eleven) chose to write traditional research papers. Those students were to explore some sort of community or social problem. The papers covered a range of issues, as can be seen from some of the titles: "Perspectives of Managing a Moose Population in McGrath, Alaska"; "The Ethics of Invasive Animal Research"; and "Building a Better Alaska with Molybdenum," a hard metallic element, which can be found in large quantities throughout Alaska. One student also chose to complete a multigenre paper exploring problems facing animal shelters and ways to potentially remedy these issues. For his project, the student designed a public relations campaign that could be used by the animal shelter in Fairbanks as well as at other shelters throughout the nation. His multigenre paper included the following components: a newspaper editorial, a brochure, a script for a radio advertisement, and a phone interview manuscript. I'm sure that completing the different components of this project required more time and energy than a typical research project.

The fact that so many students chose to complete a more traditional research project serves as an appropriate transition into the next section of my paper: the difficulties of integrating service learning into the composition course. Although this is just a small sampling, the sampling suggests that when given the choice, most students would prefer something they know and are familiar with, rather than something new, as would most people. In addition, comments from several of the students in my course revealed that they viewed the service-learning project as "extra" work and as volunteer

labor. For instance, one of my students who chose to complete a traditional research project and who had been in the military, said he had already done his "service" work. Another student, who had done a service-learning project in high school, viewed the choice as a "been there; done that" situation. It just wasn't something that interested him.

Thomas Deans emphasizes that service learning is "at heart a pedagogy of action and reflection, one that centers on a dialectic between community outreach and academic inquiry" (2). Although I agree with Deans, I am not sure that students see it that way. If I taught a course like this in the future, I would make it known to students in advance that service would be the emphasis of the course. More specifically, I would publish the information in the course schedule, and I would post fliers on the course around campus. Doing so might attract those students who would be interested in service. The term I taught this course, most students did not know in advance that service would be encouraged. I also would spend more time discussing and reading about the concept of service in the classroom. Doing so might help students to see service as an opportunity to link knowledge and action.

Another complexity of integrating service into composition is the time commitment, particularly for faculty at a university that has no formal service-learning program or center for establishing community contacts. Prior to the start of the semester, I contacted several community agencies to see if my students could volunteer with them. Although only one student chose the community-service option, it took time to make the contacts. After completing the course, I can see the benefit of having university-wide support and funding for service-learning efforts. However, one advantage of having the teacher set up the contacts is that the teacher becomes more connected to the community and probably has a better sense of what the students are

going through. In addition, this connection allows for more direct communication between the community members and the teacher.

After reading my students' reflective essays on their projects, I also noticed a need to better correlate the readings with the projects. In her reflective essay, Celeste pointed out that several students in the course were not from Alaska and that it would have been helpful to have more readings on Alaska and Native Alaskan issues prior to completing the final project. I can see how incorporating more readings on Alaska would have added depth to the course, and it also might have encouraged more students to participate in the Native Elders class. However, since all students were not required to write about Native issues or participate in the multicultural component of the course, integrating the readings might have meant potentially losing those students who were working on traditional research projects.

In retrospect, integrating service and multicultural elements into my composition classroom was a positive experience. The Cultural Knowledge of Native Elders course is a rare opportunity for University of Alaska Fairbanks students because it provides a rich and dynamic contact zone for our students. Service in the community also allows students to have direct interaction with people they might not meet in the university setting. The students who chose those options gained from the experience. However, incorporating such elements into composition also adds new complexities that need to be considered. As Nora Bacon explains, this integration "creates a number of problems that can be solved only by thoughtful (and labor-intensive) steps on the part of teachers and program administrators [. . .]" (52). Despite the difficulties, I do think that steps can be taken to improve the integration of service in the composition course. Some of these steps include allowing more time for the planning and preparation of such courses, advertising the service emphasis of the course to students well in advance of the course,

maintaining close links with the community members who are partners in the course, and discussing the concept of service with students so that they can see it not as volunteer labor but an opportunity to integrate knowledge and action.

Works Cited

Alaska Native Studies Department. "The Alaska Native Elders in Residence Collection of Taped Narratives." Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Native Studies Department, n.d.

Adler-Kassner, Linda, Robert Crooks, and Ann Watters, eds. "Service-Learning and Composition at the Crossroads." *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*. Washington: American Association for Higher Education and NCTE, 1997. 1-18.

Bacon, Nora. "Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges, Questions." *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Composition*. Washington: American Association for Higher Education and NCTE, 1997. 39-53.

Ball, Kevin, and Amy M. Goodburn. "Composition Studies and Service Learning: Appealing to Communities?" *Composition Studies* 28.1 (2001) 79-94.

Deans, Thomas. *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*. Urbana: IL: NCTE, 2000.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

University of Alaska Fairbanks Office of Planning Analysis & Institutional Research. "Fall 2000 Student Headcount by Campus, Level, and Full-Time/Part-Time Status." 6 April 2001. 16 March 2002. <http://www.uaf/pair/00CampLev.html>.

- - -. "Fall 2000 Student Headcount by Ethnicity and Campus." 24 April 2001. 16 March 2002. http://www.uaf.edu/pair/00ethnic.html.

University of Alaska Fairbanks University Relations. "History." 20 August 1999. 16 March 2002. http://www.uaf.edu/univrel/facts/history.htm.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Aiaska QuickFacts from the U.S. Census Bureau [2000]." 7 Feb. 2002. 17 March 2002. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/2000.html

[1] Deans sorts community writing programs intro three groupings: "those that write *for* the community; those that write *about* the community; and those that write *with* the community" (16). For a helpful overview of the three paradigms see page 17 in *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*.